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AUTHOR Kaplin, Diana Whitney
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ABSTRACT

A study to determine the communication needs and activities of a variety of organizations was conducted by interviewing representatives of ten organizations ranging in size from a staff of two to an international staff of 25,000 persons. The in-depth interviews were designed to gain information about the nature of the organization and the respondent's role in it, the nature of communication within the organization, the nature of communication problems within the organization, the organization's needs in the area of communication services, and the nature of positions available to professionals in communication. Needs and problems that were identified included: improving public speaking skills; improving employees' interpersonal skills; increasing the effectiveness of group communication (meetings); improving problem-solving, decision-making, and negotiation skills within the organization; improving communication channels and feedback systems; improving the quality and quantity of information dissemination; examining the means of communication within the organization and their relationships to each other; interpreting computer information; developing strategies for and measurement of organizational change; and providing opportunities for employees to explore their intrapersonal communication in relation to their work. (TJ)

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Organizational Communication: A Needs Assessment

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Diana Whitney Kaplin
Department of Speech Communication
Temple University

1734 Spruce Street
Philadelphia, PA 19103

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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted in the Philadelphia area to determine the communication needs and activities of a variety of local organizations. Data was collected on the types of communication problems currently facing organizations, the nature of the communication programs and services utilized by organizations, and the types of organizational positions available to professionals trained in communications.

In-depth interviews were conducted with representatives from ten organizations. Seven are Directors of Training or Organizational Development in companies with over 500 employees. Others interviewed include a Funding Resource Consultant, a Management Consultant with a manufacturing company and the Vice President and the Director of Personnel of a bank.

Interviews were based on a structured interview guide consisting of a combination of open-ended and close-ended questions. The guide was designed to obtain information in each of the following areas:

- The nature of the organization and the respondent's role in his/her organization.
- The nature of communication training within the organization.
- The nature of communication problems within the organization.
- The organization's needs in the area of communication services.
- The nature of positions available to professionals in communication.

Information collected was analyzed via content analysis. Results of data analysis are organized to reflect a categorical breakdown of information according to the actual data collected.

One may conclude from the interview data that there is indeed a need for organizational communication specialists. Interviewees identified the following communication needs and problems:

- To improve public speaking skills.
- To increase the effectiveness of group communication in meetings, work teams and support groups.
- To improve communication channels and feedback systems.
- To improve both the quantity and quality of information disseminated throughout the organization.
- To systematically examine all the different means of communication within the organization and their relationships to one another.
- To better interpret computerized information for human understanding and utilization.
- To develop strategies for and measurement of organizational change.
- To improve problem solving, decision making and negotiation skills within the organization.
- To improve employees interpersonal skills.
- To provide opportunities for employees to explore their intrapersonal communication in relation to their work.

Results of this study lead to two conclusions. First, there are positions currently existing in organizations for professionals in human communication as trainers, consultants and negotiators. Second, there is also a need for the establishment of additional positions for organizational communication professionals such as interpersonal communication specialists, organizational communication researchers and communication system analysts.

INTRODUCTION

The accepted status of organizational communication as an applied field of study raises the question: What roles, outside of academia, exist for professionals in organizational communication? Knowledge of the communication needs of individuals, whose work behavior is constrained by the rules, norms and values of large organizations, provides a data base from which a list of roles for organizational communication professionals can be generated.

A study was conducted in the Philadelphia area to determine the communication needs and activities of a variety of local organizations. Data was collected on the types of communication problems currently facing organizations, the nature of the communication programs and services utilized by organizations, and the types of organizational positions available to professionals trained in communication.

Procedures

The study was conceived and carried out in three phases: Sample identification, data collection, and data analysis. Sample identification involved compiling a list of interviewees meeting the following criteria:

1. Employment in a high labor intensive organization.
2. Willingness to be interviewed as a representative of the organization.
3. Accessibility to information regarding planned communication activities within the organization.

Representatives were selected from ten organizations. Seven were Directors of Training or Organizational Development in companies with over 500 employees. Others included a Funding Resource Consultant, a Management Consultant with a manufacturing company, the Vice-President and the Director of Personnel of a bank.

The organizations contacted ranged in size from a staff of two to an international staff of approximately 25,000 persons. The diversified functions of these organizations included providing funding resources to issue oriented and third world groups, providing mental health care and services, manufacturing and distributing foods and other products, and banking.

The data collection phase involved in-depth interviews based on a structured interview guide consisting of both open-ended and close-ended questions. The guide was designed to obtain information in each of the following areas:

1. The nature of the organization and the respondent's role in his/her organization. Sample questions: What is your position in the organization? What are some of the specific things you do in this capacity? Are there any tasks you perform that you would consider as communication tasks?
2. The nature of communication training within the organization. Sample questions: Does your organization offer training to employees in interpersonal communication skills? What is the nature of this training? Who conducts it? Who participates? Who pays for it?

3. The nature of communication problems within the organization. Sample questions: Are there situations in your organization that might be considered communication problems? How are these situations handled?

4. The organization's needs in the area of communication services. Sample questions: Are there areas of communication within your organization that could be improved? Is there a need for public speaking training in your organization? Is there a need for more effectively run meetings?

5. The nature of positions available to professionals in communication. Sample questions? What positions exist in your organization for people trained in communication? What kinds of people external to the organization are called on to solve communication problems?

The third phase of the study was data analysis via content analysis. Results of data analysis were organized to reflect the catagorical breakdown of information according to the actual data collected.

Results

One may conclude from the interview data that there is indeed a need for organizational communication specialists. Interviewees identified the following needs and problems:

- To improve public speaking skills. Representative of responses in this area was the respondent who stated, "we recognize the importance of presentation skills, there is a need for improvement in our organization". Public speaking skills are used in

situations both internal and external to the organization. Managers who must orally deliver annual programs and budget reports need training. Executives, sales personnel and public relations personnel who represent the organization in a variety of external contexts were discussed as able to benefit from public speaking instruction.

- To improve employees interpersonal skills. Interpersonal communication skills were recognized as a necessary component to several organizational tasks. A bank representative stated, for example "training for tellers in interpersonal interface with the public is currently priority". Human resource groups who deal with employee problems were said to need listening and interviewing skills. One interviewee described his own job as involving the management of interpersonal communication problems such as conflict between a boss and a subordinate.
- To increase the effectiveness of group (meetings) communication. Concern was expressed for the needs to improve meetings, to establish managerial support groups and for work group team building. One respondent expressed, "we have the standard complaint, too many meetings. Few people are good at running meetings. Few know how to plan an agenda or when to go for a decision".
- To improve problem solving, decision making and negotiation skills within the organization. One typical interviewee clearly stated, "we need models of decision making". Problem solving and decision making skills were discussed as important and often lacking during company mergers, contract renewals and program planning meetings.

- To improve communication channels and feedback systems. Respondents were very interested in discovering the blocks to effective information flow in their organization. Most recognized that problems existed somewhere in the organization but have no means of identifying and correcting the problem. Written channels of communication were most frequently criticized as ineffective. For example, one interviewee stated, "the current feedback system is not the most effective. Memos are overused, paperwork is out of control, there is too much".
- To improve both the quantity and quality of information disseminated throughout the organization. A major complaint was that much of information sent from executives down to the organization is either redundant, irrelevant or excessive. There is a need to establish functional filtering and sorting procedures for information flowing throughout the organizations.
- To systematically examine all the different means of communication within the organization and their relationships to one another. Representatives of the larger organizations expressed a need for improved coordination of the existing range of communication channels and activities in their organization. Such coordination would necessarily be preceded by a systematic identification of the communicants and their inter-relationships within the organization. One respondent, for example, was particularly concerned with the relationship between communication and organizational decentralization. He said "we have a need for a systematic way

of looking at all the different means of communication within a multi-company decentralized organization".

- To better interpret computerized information for human understanding and utilization. One respondent stated, "we have a real problem making computerized information meaningful to managers. There is a lot of valuable information that is unused because managers don't know what it means". Another put it bluntly when he stated, "People are afraid of computers". There was a strong need expressed for procedures and/or persons to facilitate the translation of computerized information into information readily understood by persons whose job performance may be dependent upon such information.
- To develop strategies for and measurement of organizational change. The need for change centered around specific issues such as affirmative action and management style. Respondents expressed a strong desire to expand their own knowledge of how to change the attitudes and values collectively held by members of their organization. A need to measure attitudes and attitudinal change was presented as important to persons responsible for organizational development.
- To provide opportunities for employees to explore their intrapersonal communication in relation to their work. Respondents expressed a need for their organizations to provide programs to help individuals resolve career expectation conflicts. Inconsistencies between an individual's expectations and the company's expectations

create problems that need to be resolved. One interviewee stated, "people's expectations and self-fulfilling prophecies block dialogue". The need exists for employees to participate in programs such as assertiveness training, career development and human resource development.

Discussion

The interview data clearly show that organizations have communication needs. A variety of roles exist in which communication professionals might work to alleviate and prevent communication problems in organizations. Results of this study lead to two conclusions.

First, there are positions currently existing (both internal and external to organizations) for professionals in human communication as trainers, consultants, researchers, and negotiators. Persons involved in organizational training conduct workshops on topics such as: leadership, motivation, communication, public speaking, decision-making and management style. Most large organizations maintain an internal training staff, however, outside specialists are often called in to conduct training seminars in specialized areas such as communication skills and public speaking.

Organizational Development Consultants are involved in a wide range of activities emphasizing human interaction. A typical consultant respondent described his own job as "the development and implementation of programs to meet individual and organization needs in the area of communication". Like trainers, consultant roles exist both internal and external to the organization.

Respondents discussed research in their organizations as collecting

data necessary for job performance. There are few internal persons charged with the sole responsibility of data collection. Most research is carried out by an individual in need of specific information. Some organizations have departments of research and development that do conduct behavioral research. For the most part, however, outside researchers are contracted to conduct organizational studies.

There are currently positions available for persons skilled in negotiation and decision-making. Organizations employ staff members with negotiation skills to handle labor relation problems, contract negotiations, mergers and other situations involving the need for individuals representing different views to come to agreement.

Second, there is a need for the establishment of additional roles for communication professionals as interpersonal communication specialists, organizational communication researchers and communication system analysts.

The wide range of jobs in large organizations that are dependent upon interpersonal skills and the problems that arise from lack of interpersonal skills provides justification for the establishment of a role of interpersonal communication specialists. The asset of a communication professional to an organization comes from his/her ability to look beyond problems as an individual's responsibility (the role taken by industrial psychologists) and to understand the relationship between individuals and their impact upon organizational performance.

Rigorous theoretically based research is seldom conducted in the organizations studied. The expressed needs for a systematic way of knowing about communication throughout the organization and for better means of

measuring attitudes leads to the conclusion that there ought to be roles established for professionals trained in organizational communication research. Interpersonal behavior research, attitude surveys and communication network analysis can provide valuable information to organizational leaders and planners.

The role of communication system analyst might be closely related to that of organizational communication researcher. A system analyst would need research skills in order to identify the communication system. The need for improved information flow and communication system feedback, however, provides reason for the establishment of a communication system analyst who would identify, monitor and change the communication system when necessary.

The value of professionals trained in communication was recognized by the organizations studied. There are organization communication needs which call for communication professionals to move into existing organizational roles. There are other organizational needs which might best be handled by the creation of new roles designed around the specialized skills of communication professionals.